

Holier than Thou
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Ordinand sermon, for the week of March 20, 2005 (Length: 20 minutes.)

Lectionary reading: Phillippians 2:5-11

"Holier than thou." People who avoid us Christians often refer to us as a group of self-righteous yet hypocritical people who think we are entitled to go "our way or highway."

The 2004 general election in the United States has been called by several media pundits as "a triumph of value-voters in the unstable post-9/11 era." By this, observers imply that their choice of the nation's political leadership was driven by the voters' stand on certain set of values. Perhaps such "values" include their objections to homosexuality, abortion and taxes funding causes they deem unworthy.

The church universal also has been deeply divided over these issues. These "wedge issues" contribute to a further polarization between the "liberal" and "conservative" Christians.

As the newest addition to the Celtic Anabaptist Communion of churches and ministries, I probably represent one of the most theologically and socially liberal sides within the fellowship. While some of my closest friends are Evangelical Christians with conservative views, I have worked extensively in and with some of the most progressive churches in the area. Some people who are deeply turned off by their perceptions of Christianity often complain to me that Evangelical Christians, or "fundies," are mean-spirited and closed-minded. Some of these complaints come from those in liberal churches, while others come from those who are not part of a Christian community.

Today's lectionary reading includes the portion from Phillippians. In this passage, the writer of this letter exhorts us to follow the example of Jesus by humbling and lowering ourselves even when we are blessed with privileges. On this day as we commemorate both the death of our Lord Jesus Christ and the story of Exodus from the Egyptian slavery, I would like to remind us of committing our lives for justice, freedom and love for all people.

A year ago in my town, the County Commissioners decided to issue marriage licenses to gay couples, with a rationale that denying them to same-gender partners would be discriminatory, and thus unconstitutional. Local and international gay community leaders celebrated this occasion as a triumph for their liberty and human rights. A number of churches also joined in celebration and their ministers rushed to officiate mass gay weddings at every imaginable location throughout Portland. These Christians believe that God's love is universal, thus gay persons should not be discriminated against on the account of their sexuality or sexual identity.

One day not far after that news, I took a stroll through downtown Portland, Oregon, and noticed a couple of signs above the covered porch of a certain liberal, mainline church. Two identical signs boldly proclaimed in red, all-cap letters, "NO TRESPASSING. FORBIDDEN TO ENTER OR OCCUPY EXCEPT ON OFFICIAL CHURCH BUSINESS. VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED." This porch could clearly provide a modest shelter from rain and wind for those who live outdoors.

A few weeks later I attended an event at the same church. As I exited the building, I noticed a stack of handouts on a table next to the door. I picked one up. It read: "How to deal with mentally ill persons on church property." The flier contained detailed instructions on how to "deal with mentally ill" people, including a range of activities from ignoring to use the church phone to call the police to have them remove the "mentally ill." This same church, however, actively sponsors groups for gay and transgender people, calls itself "Open and Affirming," has an openly gay associate pastor, and sends a large contingent to the annual gay pride parade.

I must wonder if defending one's human rights to basic, daily necessities for survival, such as food and shelter is any less important than defending one's "human right" to be homosexual. After I've seen and experienced over the last 12 months, I must, rather reluctantly, conclude that all the talk about "gay rights" and the gay activists' assertion for gay marriage represents not a progress in civil rights, equality or freedom, but rather a sign of an increasing arrogance by the upwardly mobile, white, middle-class homosexual elite as it attempts to sanitize its public image by assimilating into the mainstream middle-class society and by distancing itself from the other oppressed classes of people.

I am bringing this up because over the last two weeks, I've seen very disturbing string of events at yet another church that calls itself inclusive and affirming of sexual minorities. This is the church I have been working in as a healing minister and in various other functions. So I will use this case study not only as an example but also as a self-criticism.

A certain Wednesday evening, a couple of obviously homeless young adults with a shopping cart stopped by at that church. They were \$60 short of the required deposit money to rent a room, and they needed a proof of housing to keep their baby from being taken away by the state. We were just wrapping up a class when they came to us, so we had about seven people. Amazingly, we made them wait outside while we began debating and even taking a "poll" on whether we should help these kids! Eventually a few of us offered whatever they could afford, after 20 minutes of indecision. Those who were reluctant to help claimed that they knew better than the homeless youth, that they knew what was right even if that does not help the kids "in the way that they wanted." I almost snapped at them while reminding these white, middle-class people of the privileges they take for granted. I finally walked out in fury and disgust, telling them they could at least pray for a miracle. I still feel bad for not being very helpful.

On another day, I had a chance to chat with a certain church maintenance person. He was complaining with me about "street people," then told me to keep the garden hose rolled up neatly so the "street people" won't trip over it and sue the church. Out of my own curiosity, I had done a little experiment to see if what I have been sensing was true: I've found a fairly clean, usable blanket from a pile of yard sale leftovers in the neighborhood. I rolled it neatly and hid it around the churchyard, as if some "street people" might do to keep their stuff. The same evening, it was gone—I inspected the dumpster and behold the blanket was right there. Now, imagine if someone comes to your home one day unannounced, breaks in and throws everything away in a dumpster? What this arrogant, white, middle-class custodian did amounts to the same in the eyes of the "street people."

And yet there was another incident again after a Sunday service. I was not paying attention to the whole incident so this is just my observation from what I know. Around the time when the late morning service was winding down, a couple of people perceived as "homeless" came to church and asked for money. I saw three or four ushers heading to the front door perhaps trying to prevent the entry of these people. I followed them and I saw they were again debating what to do or whether to help. I did not hear the conversation, but I saw they were kept outside, the ushers blocked the doors to keep them from coming inside, then someone offered a bag of groceries from the food pantry. The street people looked inside the bag and returned it to an usher, saying they cannot use it (I later learned the contents of this bag – everything requires cooking, and they don't have a kitchen!). He got mad and told the couple to go away, threatening to call the police and have them remove the couple by force. He loudly yelled at bystanders saying that the "bums" choose to be "bums" and if we help them they squander everything on alcohol. Then he slammed the door shut, locked it from inside, then kept others from helping this couple in any way.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the only person who was hostile to the couple from outside. Another usher was loudly complaining about how "homeless walks into church and steals" from the church kitchen. Mind you, the kitchen is pretty much empty at any given time and hasn't really been used a lot, and if there's anything, it's a stale leftover that needs to be eaten by somebody. And this is a church that claims to be an inclusive community of faith committed to social justice!

Am I the only one who sees there is something awfully wrong with this picture?

A sizable percentage of that church's members are gay, and they found acceptance there and became some of the dedicated leaders of the congregation.

Imagine this scenario: You are gay. You look like a stereotypical gay. You walk into a church that you don't know about and you want help with your electric bill. The lead usher stares at you with disgust and contempt. This stocky usher suddenly becomes a church bouncer keeping you from entering the building. He yells at you for being gay and how you molest children, have orgies and spread AIDS. Then he yells at you for choosing the gay lifestyle. After two minutes of this, you don't get any help and the ushers are inside debating whether the church should help the "faggot" or they would do God's will by not helping you and make you freeze to death. Then the lead usher comes back and tells you to leave immediately or he will call the police to send you to jail for trespassing.

Is there any difference?

Historians and sociologists often point to the ever-persistent pattern in American history, in which a previously oppressed class as it gains more power, economic clout and privileges soon becomes oppressors over other, less privileged and further marginalized, class of people. Completely self-absorbed in defending their own single-issue interests and in competing over the perceived scarcity, these now upwardly-mobile oppressed people turn worse oppressors than those who oppressed them.

When the Israelites left Egypt, they were slaves who had no status or privileges—no investments, no retirement funds, and no jobs. All what they had was their newly won freedom. Later God gave the law to Moses. Repeatedly God instructed the Israelites not to oppress the strangers among them. Exodus 23:9 says, “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Furthermore, the Word of God requires us to treat the “aliens” with the same degree of respect with our own people, as if such strangers are part of our community. Leviticus 19:34 says, “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

This leads us to another set of questions. First, why do most of us “inclusive” Christians not making any conscious effort to engage these strangers into the full life, activities and leadership of our churches? Instead of just handing out something every once in a while at our whims, why are we not inviting them inside, getting to know them as persons and actively integrate them into our communities of faith? Why is it that when we do something about “them,” we almost invariably keep these people at an arm’s length, treat them as if they are stupid or retarded, and act condescendingly and paternalistically towards them? Somehow for some reason they are never treated with the same love or respect we give for our church members.

James 2:2-8 (NRSV):

For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?

This is why I insist on, and commit myself to ensure, the full engagement and inclusion of the displaced or economically disadvantaged people to the life and community of the church, including in its leadership and all of its activities.

Second, why do we tend to make misguided assumptions that somehow these displaced people and economically disadvantaged people are always outsiders with some kind of character defects? Are we too scared to realize that it can happen to any of us also at any time? Are we in so much denial that we pretend like we are somehow safe from homelessness because we take our privileges for granted and can no longer imagine a life without them? Let me go back to that role-reversal illustration for a moment. These were exactly the kind of treatments some of us have received in the past at the hands of other Christians. So why do we forget that? Why are we not eagerly creating a truly inclusive and just community where no one is discriminated against or excluded on the account of one’s socioeconomic status, with the same zeal some of us have pushed for acceptance of homosexuals, ordination of women or racial integration?

Gay people often suffer from the hatred in the name of Christianity. Often they are even called Sodomites. In Ezekiel 16:46-49, however, talks about the true sins of Sodom. The verse 49 reads, “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” We’ve seen enough “gay pride” year after year, but what kind of example are we as Christian churches making to the world if we slammed our doors on the homeless people in need, yelling at them and calling 9-1-1 to have them removed? Isn’t that just like what the prophet Amos refers to as “trampling the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way”? Amos 2:7 says when we do

this, God's name is being profaned! Just because we have our own comfortable living and careers and houses and cars doesn't give any of us a right to be arrogant or condescending, let alone to consider us holier than the others. When the Christian movement just began, the first followers of the Holy Spirit were together and held everything in common (Acts 2:44-47) and redistributed their wealth among themselves so no one would be in need. Pay a very close attention to the verses following and note the succession of events. First, they shared everything together (vv. 24 and 25). Second, they worshipped and shared meals as a community with joyfulness and generous hearts (v. 26). Third, they had goodwill of the people, leaving positive impressions on the public (v. 27). Fourth, and then, God added more people to the Christian community (v. 27). Imagine a place where no one is excluded from one big happy family party! No one won't have to worry about whether they can afford it. God only allows churches to grow if they are sharing and generous; and by "sharing" I do not mean "charity." Note that these two terms mean two different things. Economic justice activist Kirsten Anderberg neatly summarizes the clear differences between the two:

It took me quite a while in this world to see the subtle differences between charity and actual sharing and giving. Charity involves one entity keeping all the wealth and power, and giving metered allowances to those they control. Sharing involves equal access to resources and equal access to power. Giving involves relinquishment of control of property to another. Charity is controlling and paternalistic, while sharing and giving involve empowerment. Charity is a very different species than sharing and giving. This subtle difference is played out in so many ways it is astounding, from our "charity" in Iraq, where we want total control yet try to play ourselves off as merciful, selfless "givers," to Christian soup kitchens that hold food from the hungry until the hungry proclaim allegiance to a mythic white god from the Middle East. People need to ask themselves whether a situation involves actual sharing or giving, or whether it is manipulative "charity," at every turn in the road.

A community that shares grows! It grows because it welcomes everyone and sends out a clear message that everyone is a creation of God, an image of God, and economic and social status is no barrier to God's family. It also dynamically affirms the truth that by attending to our basic human needs and advocating for our fundamental human rights we glorify God and give proper respect to the reflections of God in all human beings. In this season of reflection about death and life, I invite us to truly examine what is going on in our churches and if we are not neglecting or excluding anyone. The prophet Micah said, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8.) This is the message of Lent as we welcome the resurrected Christ in a few days. After all, our God is one and Christ died for all people.